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American Song

A BOOK OF POEMS

By Paul Engle

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

Garden City 1934 New York

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FOR STEPHEN AND ROSEMARY

BLOW, LONG TRADE WINDS of *American speech*,
Over this land where we can rise, unfurl
Our new and untried sails, and drive with you
Westward forever to eternity—

*Land of the mountain-kindled Utah sun
Where the grey lizards flow like liquid stone,
Land of the Indian months, desirous moon
Of rutting elk, the proud head lifted and bugling,
Moon of the grass-consuming heat, chill moon
When the south-flung arrows of the wild geese fly,
Land of the Iowa cornfields endlessly rising
Out of the new-split prairie sod like reeds
Yellowly climbing from an inland ocean
That has no deep but is forever edge,
Land of Missouri hills where every man
Plows the deep furrows of his heart alone,
O land of the live machines, the ever-moving
Tireless body with dark skin of oil.*

*Here, in our land, we will not look back
Eastward across the old ancestral ocean*

*To any country by our blood abandoned
Years ago, but like our fathers turn
Again our backs on the sunrise end of earth
And march with a shrill whistling and our hands
Slouched in our pockets, where the light of the falling
Sun is a fever in our eyes, to find
The great west country of our destiny,
Carrying the whole world with us in our arms
As Clark's men carried the drummer boys in the flooded
Ohio valley before Kaskaskia.*

*Nations of Europe, we leave you now to drag
Your worn-out bellies on the sun-warmed rock
And huddle by the ashes of old fires
That warmed you once, swaying your shrunken bodies
And keening your thin, sad wail. The flame of life
Leaps now in us, and we will make our own
Songs of living fire from it with hands
That burn in writing them For us the breath
That made you mighty and that gave you eyes
To see into the simple heart of the world,
That once blew strength to us through the peopled road
By which we fled away from you, is but
A blind wind staring from an empty door.*

*You have lived with time until it has become
Only the long hair of a lovely woman
Shaken out softly, darkly over your eyes.
For us time is a stronger, harder thing
That cannot be clenched in the sharp teeth of a word—
Time is a gleaming broad-axe, with the helve
Shaped to our hands, and we swing it from towering
Shoulders with a shout—it is a trail*

*That we must follow inescapably,
And yet we build it out ourselves through tangled
Underbrush, blazing the trees with white
Signs under the grey bark, for those
Who are the generations after us,
Poor men, and humble, who cannot help but follow
Down an old road they have not carved, to an end
So pitifully not of their own making—
Time, for us, is a bright ball to be thrown
Into the air until it takes the light
Of the sun and comes down radiant, to be caught.
For all our days are rip tides cutting through
The inexorable flow of history
In which you all have drowned.*

*Spirit of song,
Flying out westward from the time-tired lands,
You surf-beleaguered bird, beating to shore
On wind that has an ocean width behind it,
Light on our fresh and friendly beaches, there
Are the wave-scattered sticks for you to build
High in the lofty tree of our new life
Your re-creative nest.*

*Here we live
The full and reckless life, nothing declared
Too hard but we will give it our endeavor—
Climb to the highest hill and snare a string
Over the wind for a great kite and fly it—
Beat the wild sunlight with a brazen hammer
Into bracelets more supple than thin gold,
Shape of the tough steel moonlight, boldly bent.
An Archimedes lever to lift the world
And throw it over a shoulder for good luck—
Shatter one mountain range upon another*

*Because we like the clamor and the dust—
Raise the highest building in the world
To sanctify a gamble, not a god.*

*We have built our cities—O Manhattan towers,
Born from the arrogance of energy
That cannot stop but must forever lunge
Higher and higher, and when its strength is gone
Feed pelican-like on the bare force of its nerves—
Chicago where the stockyards and the lake
Have not the beauty of a land across
An ocean centuries-wide, but have their own
Fierce and wilder harmony, the bastard
Child of elemental strength that thumbs
Its nose at all the smug and timid pride
Of ancient towns—Frisco where the sun
Clangs a brief moment at the Golden Gate
Before it strides away to the Orient—
New Orleans of the delta-tongued, deep mouths
That feed the hungry Mississippi throat
With the ships of seven oceans.*

*We have found
The machine not god or devil, but a bull
With the piston's double-chambered heart pumping
The live steam of his blood, the mighty muscles
Bunched at the shoulders and the twisted horns
Goring the trodden steel, and a ring in his nose
For the trained hand to lead him.*

*Out of machines,
The leaping force that springs alive and dies
Beneath the subtle fingers of a man,
And all the clamorous nervousness of cities
Where the dishevelled human spirit roams*

*Dark alleys with the bitter wind of pain
Blowing a burning marrow through its bones,
And life in the bodies of despairing men
Is a strange ghost haunting the flesh (O sick-for-earth
Geranium in the old tomato can
Blooming the sullen window), we shall make
A newer vision of communal man
Whose shining spade in the nation's fertile fields
Will dig out and destroy the money-soured
Exhausted soil, and leave the sweet clean earth
For the plow of a newer way that will be part
Of the old American dream from which we waken
To find we are a portion of that dream.
And with the exuberance that is our blood
We shall with eager fingers grip the long
Bull whip of our faith and crack it over
The tossing, dust-parched cattle of the land,
Stampede, if it must be, to get them moving,
And drive them lowing northward on a later
Chisholm Trail, and in the long night, ride
Slowly around the sleeping herd, and sing,
To soothe the restless, a loping, high-pitched song
Intrinsic to the singer and the place.*

*America, turn in and find yourself.
Not a continent, but eternity, is ahead,
Over the far prairie and the hills
Where no trail leads, out to an end unknown.
Now the huge pendulum swing of history
Begins to return upon you, it is time
To leave this wandering always on the earth
And take from the hawk his flying wisdom, soar
On the keen edge of the world's wind, veer and hover*

*Until you take the very stars for eyes
And see below you, moving on the land
Like a gopher homeless in a new-plowed field,
The living object of your flight, the running
Spirit of the country—fold your wings
And plunge through the air to snatch it in your claws,
Swing up, and hang it on the highest peak
Where it can be a sign to every man
Like a scratched hand on a hard Sierra rock
Pointing the tortuous, faint path beyond
Tree line, into the snows, over the ridge,
And down into the dared and dreamed-of valley.*

*America, great glowing open hearth,
In you we will heat the cold steel of our speech,
Rolling it molten out into a mold,
Polish it to a shining length, and straddling
The continent, with hands that have been fashioned,
One from the prairie, one from the ocean, winds,
Draw back a brawny arm with a shout and hurl
The fiery spear-shaft of American song
Against the dark destruction of our doom
To burn the long, black wind of the years with flame.*

The Huntsmen are up in America, and they
are already past their first sleep in Persia.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE, 1658

. . and all the thirteen Angels
Rent off their robes to the hungry wind, and threw their
golden scepters
Down on the land of America, . . .

WILLIAM BLAKE, 1793

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★
★ ★
★ American Song ★
★ ★
★

For E. J. O'B.

THE LAST WHISKEY CUP



WE HAVE shot the last whiskey cup from the trapper's head,

Nailed the last coonskin to the barn, given the buckskin
Shirt to the movies, watched the covered wagon
Roll whitely through the dust of wretched murals
In small-town banks, the ancient Greek acanthus
Framing the Utah trail, the dignity
Of Cornstalk, Pontiac, American Horse
Immortalized in the ads of automobiles,
Chewing tobacco, baking powder. (And in my vision
In the night, in the lonely place of the spirits,
Two men like arrows shot through the sky and talked
Secretly to me in the voice of my ancestors.)

America, now, a nervous nigger dancing
To the mighty roll of radio-chanted jazz
On the hollow drum of the world for a few pitched coins
Through eternity bright with hanging galaxies
Elbows its way.

Yet there are still great dreams
Haunting this land, and I have known men

From Brooklyn Bridge to the Golden Gate who dreamed
them:

I recall a section hand spitting tobacco juice
All over a hand car and saying, "I've walked track
From Chi to Frisco for thirty years. It's a
Hell of a big country, mister."

A Negro evangelist
Beating the drum of God from Harlem to Mobile
With diamonds studding his teeth and a yellow vest, shout-
ing,

"Dis is goin' to be de nex' land of de Lawd, sinners.
He's zoomin' from heaven in an airplanc all silver and
gold,

An' Gabriel in a white silk suit's goin' to drive Him
From Buffalo to Birmingham in a fiery Ford,
Honkin' His horn as loud as Judgment Day!
An' crinkly-headed angels with black wings
Savin' repentun' souls on every corner.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

And in Iowa
A farmer husking corn down a mile-long field—
"Best damn corn land in the world, loam a foot deep.
My grandfather came from Ohio to break this land,
And his came from Vermont, and back of him they came
Clear from Germany. My family's
Had a hand in buildin' it up. They've watched it grow,
And it ain't done yet."

In Manhattan under the L
A man with the insomnia of fierce dreams
Walking the restless night away—"It's a dirty,
Noisy, incredibly ugly, incredibly beautiful,
Don't-give-a-damn, soft-hearted nation.
We're all nervous as a wolf bitch in heat.

We've got to make a noise, if nothing more
Than get drunk and stand on a street corner and yammer.

Yet there's a spirit here, I know, I've felt it
From Boston to Hollywood. It's a strong thing,
Bigger than we know, big as the land, maybe,
If we could see it whole. I think it burns
With the clearness of hardwood fire for those with eyes
Alert and calm enough to find the flame.
It's an awful, crushing land, but, Christ, it's great
To be a portion of it."

We have shot the last
Shaggy buffalo on the Western plains,
Preempted the last free land—Now it is time
(I have known it long in my heart) for this country
To twist a lariat of us and throw it
Over the ocean-to-ocean-flinging land
And flip its loop across the lifted, crashing
Defiant horns of the wild American spirit
And with a twist around the saddle horn
Drop it to earth, and on its sprawling hide
Burn the clear new-world brand that unto men
Shall be a witness of our heritage
Wherever that great untamable beast shall toss
The stars of heaven on its horns and graze
Across the grassy ranges of the world.

LETTERS TO SAM



YOU WRITE of gulls

Over your house where the Phœnician triremes
Beat in once from the blue East, and of skylarks
Rising from gardens where the heavy sunlight
Crumbles on Roman walls.

Here, in this Western
Land of mine where the wind travels two thousand
Miles from mountain to mountain with the drive
Of vast spaces in it, are there also birds
Singing above my fields. This is a strong
Bond for our hearts.

And yet your songs are not
My songs. Here does the golden plover
Fly the wide Mississippi where Marquette
Brought the Crucifix in a birch canoe,
Building his fires where these cornfields run
Down to the water's edge. Here the meadowlark
Hollows its nest in grasses where the iron
Tires of the westward wagons cut their ruts
Through blue stem and a foot into the loam.
The sparrow hawk at dawn circles above
This shed whose walls are shagbark hickory

Felled on this land by the axe of my grandfather
For the first house in the county.

I cannot
Give you their song. All that I can humbly
Send you now is this broken wing of speech
To flutter wildly in your foreign sky.

II

You write that you are lonely for the wild
Red dripping prairie moon that will in autumn
Vault from behind the hills and with a shout
Beat earth and sky with light, and climbing up
Slowly, hand over hand, from cloud to cloud,
Move through the heavens with the splendid pride
Of one sure portion of the universe
That works its shining way out, undismayed
With the alarums and the discontents
Of these our little lives.

Today I saw
Wagons, with the high sides boarded up
For the first husking of the corn, drive down
The yellowing fields where pumpkins glowed like spilled
Spendthrift moons of earth rising with spring
To shine through the summer cycle of life's growth
And set in harvest with a final flame
Defying frost.

Here where the land is rich
With the re-creative stuffs of earth, the thin
Roots of wheat grip the soil with fibrous
Fingers that clutch the rain to the stalk's heart.
Here does life run richly, thrusting up
From the fat soil. Surely this moon is full

Of the quiet quality of harvest, old
As its own stolen shining, for in its light
I have heard the deep stirring of the earth and seen
Down the long valleys white with moving clover
The vague and ancient image of all life
Hover into the wind.

To you in a distant
Country where the land is gay and mirthful
And the moon sings across the sky, I bring
These happy words—That when next the moon
Enters its phases, I will be with you
There by the laughing waters of the South,
And with the Iowa hills in memory
Rolling away from us, I will with speech
Bring you the harvest night, and with my eager
Hands clenched tight above my head will shape
A pale white image of the autumn moon
That, with my circling arms, will move its brief
Orbit over the dark earth of my body.

LUTHER A. BREWER



NOTHING can be said to praise this man.
His years, and all their deeds, are what they are
And need not any praise. His life was spare
Of words and rich of acts. O let us not
Mock it with too much speaking.

His was a life
American as the land—School teacher
Just out of college, watching the great
Conestogas rocking west through Hagerstown,
Their white tops crowding through the hills like sails
Greyed with a distant sea. And so his heart
Grew restless with those turning wheels that rolled
Westward forever. He heard the few that came
East from those vast spaces talking of land
Whose swinging hulls stretched on, for all they knew,
Clean to the world's end.

So he became
Portion of all that movement, following
The long trail to the prairie lands beyond
The Mississippi, to the Iowa farms.
He knew this state when even the farthest-seeing
Eye of man from the highest hill saw only

Endless earth, and all its life a crow
Stalking the windy sky.

Give him the praise
Only of silence. Let the filled-up land
For which he labored quietly, accept him
Quietly back again. His was the dignity
Of life worked humbly out. O let him have
Now the dignity of simple earth.

LETTER TO AN ELDER GENERATION

For Glenn



WHAT would you have of us, you who are old?
Burn to the root our fields of ear-filled grain
Because you, scorning simple bread, were starved,
Too proud to mingle seed and earth and rain?

You say you buried God (weeping you say it)
And split the flesh to its essential parts—
But you have left us bodies bright with flame
And buried God no deeper than our hearts.

For most of you man moved a stricken thing
Caught helplessly between the equal darks
Of birth and death and nothing permanent
Save on his face time's agonizing marks.

Bitter you cried against the end of life
Because death was its sure and ancient way,
Because you saw yourself dissolved in earth
A little finer grained, perhaps, than clay.

We are sick of this. Have we not buried friends?
There will be sons to bury us too soon.
We will not fear it nor raise up a shout
Against the yellow and unhearing moon.

There was a splendid mockery in your
Self-pity of the fate you willed yourselves—
You cursed the axes that cut off your feet
Though you had swung them and carved out their helms.

II

O dreamful dust that answers to a name,
You have defied the basis of your birth,
You have forgotten in your bitterness
That you are blood and body of this earth.

Your eyes have lost the simple sight of living—
Shudder of earth with seed thrust and the rain,
Frost binding up unflowing sheaves of water,
Heft of a balanced axe, the curved helve grain.

You did not care for cool wind on the face,
For bent grass breathing softly when winds blow it—
We will bend down a friendly ear to grass
And catch the wind across our hip and throw it.

You were too wise for wonder, for a sense
Of strangeness in the simple fact of being—
Strength of steel, rough of stone, beneath the hand,
Tang of hay, crunch of horses, colors of seeing.

O wood thrush crying in Kentucky hills,
O grey gull poising over Puget Sound,
Sing down our hands from cursing at the sky,
Give them again the feel of friendly ground.

Under the Chippewayan woods, the wide
Iowa prairie, Illinois loam sheet—
O meadowlark in blue stem—we will watch
The birds of Francis gather at our feet.

III

Something heroic passed when you were born,
Some mighty spirit that the earth will lack
And men be craven and their living prideless
Until we give our lives to bring it back.

There have been men who took their fate and gave it
Glory beyond your money-molded pomp,
Crawford defiant at the bone-burned stake,
La Salle death-dreaming in the Southern swamp;

Hector, tamer of horses, undismayed
With crashing of the Greck blood-hungering spears,
Jogues, the black-robe Jesuit, who took
The Iroquoian tortures without tears.

O seaward subtle ships, O lovely woman,
Cause for the giving of that town to flames,
O Independence Rock where there was carved
The roster of the westward-going names.

O squirrel rifle with the smooth-worn butt
Of seasoned walnut heart, O hickory bow,
O tempered steel six-shooter of the plains,
O scalp on the lodge of the Arapaho.

There is a primitive old strength of heart
Men have called courage and that we call guts,
It bore the Crucifix and warped the wagons
Of Boone's men westward through the frozen ruts;

It was the force that flung a sudden nation
Across this Indian-defended land,
That sent the ox team and the Morgan mare
To scream and whiten in the Utah sand;

That sent strong women with one child at breast,
One in their loins, not knowing they were brave,
With bullet mould and flower seed and prayer
To plant the wolf trap on the shallow grave.

Remember, when you curse remorseless forces
That are your God, for your life-simple hurts,
Ohio women who beat out the cabin's
Fire with their dying husbands' blood-soaked shirts.

You did not have this old American courage,
You who feared life, you wept and tore your hair.
We will cry—Courage!—till the darkest death
Bend us to earth and leave us beaten there.

We will believe that there will rise a soul
Between the beaten shore lines of this land,
Where the Atlantic and Pacific snakes,
Foam-mouthed, slide in and hiss along the sand,

A spirit that will be compound of courage,
Compassion, and belief, though it be blind
With the bright splendor of a faith that hopes
In nothing more than its own humankind.

IV

We hold that life works haltingly through us,
Using for its dark ends our hands, our hearts,
That life is one vast movement and as men
We are its passing and eternal parts.

There is a force that drives us on and yet
We are that force and sometimes have controlled it,
There is an actual power that we are,
Our mind and actions, but we cannot hold it.

O splendid flame that madly makes us men,
Drives and defies, destroys but to create us,
Bring million-mannered life, bring single death,
We will accept what utter ends await us.

There is a long frontier in our own heart
That we will follow till the last shores bend
Blackly away down to the final land
With laughter and with courage to the end.

There is a forest where we walk our lives
Away beneath the spruces and the larch,
It is not that we die beneath those trees,
But always that we march, O that we march.

O South Pass where the ox and wagon broke
And men fought westward through the stone and snow.
O land beyond the great pass of the world,
Desert or Eldorado, still we go.

★
★ ★
★ Earth in Our Blood ★
★ ★
★

For J. G. S.

WHITTLING



HERE is the stick of a man's life, hard,
Sound of grain, the wrinkled bark channeled
With worm borings, nicked with a bird's beak, holding
Yet the long curve of the parent branch, ribbed
With round growth rings—

To which time comes
As a child's aimless whittling, the hacked years,
White shavings bitten by the knife's clean tooth,
Sprawling across the earth in little heaps
Where the rain may yellow them, the scornful sun
Curl the thin tips up, till the hungry knife
Split the core, and all the cruel light burn
The brown and hidden heart until it crumble.

NIGHT



NIGHT is the intimate time of men, the dark
Mother with softest hands and quietest voice
Of all the speaking hours:

the easeful time
When the cruel terror of the sun that flings
Its light into the deep, most delicate
Corners of our lives till the sad mind
Shrink, and fear build up the barrier
Of reticence, is gone, and the lone stalk
Of self climbs upward toward the night to bloom
Into the wild and dancing passion flower
Of the freed soul, until the day-harsh hands
Of dawn destroy it. Then the heavy clothes
Of the disheveled daylight disappear
And a man may move, clean and naked, clad
In the black clinging garment of that shadow
Moving forever like a wind-blown scarf
Over the white throat of earth.

The aloof

Mind gathers boldness and the loosened arms
That clenched their fists against the world reach out
And draw the friendly spirit close—This is the time

When the shy heart calls out to the shy heart
And a man speaks gladly that which he would shudder
To dream of in bright noon—The time of tears
When the unutterable sorrow breaks
The desolate defense of human pride
To plant its bitter ensign on the peak
Of day-besieging night and without shame
Weep before the staring eyes of men.

This is the time of touch; when sight is weak
The hands bring all the multi-forms of earth
Into the senses—Plunge through this water, reach
To leaf and bark of oak and the soft arms
Of poisoning grass, let bodies that would flinch
To meet in twilight mingle utterly
And with a silent tongue intensely speak
With the strong voice of touch.

Only in night
Do the dark doors that open on the deep
Profoundest corridors of every man,
Soundless and cold and never open save
Once or twice in one man's life, swing inward
And you may walk with reverent bowed head
A length of hesitant steps down those chill halls
That lead into the awful inmost rooms
Of the revealed and cringing human heart.

EVERY BROKEN THING



REVERSE life, let the small
Enfold the greater rest—
The grasped stone hold the hand,
The heart contain the breast;

The eye surround its image,
Face, hill, bird on the ground;
A pool embrace the sky,
The ear be more than sound;

Let our lifted hands
Shelter sky and sea;
Let the budded leaf
Possess the root and tree;

Let the feathery pollen
Expand beyond the flower,
The heart of time be held
In the slim hand of an hour;

Let the loose strands of the world
Let life weave out and bind;

Let all wild space be gathered
Into the narrow mind;

Let every broken thing
Be greater than the whole,
The plant of self bloom out
Above the earth's deep bowl;

Let each life gather in
All lives that went before,
Let one man be all men
To be forevermore.

ORION



O RION, tonight forsake your distant walking
And with your shining feet plunging the earth
Stoop to my humble house and pick me up,
I who have looked into your massive face
Long years of nights, and with my scared hands clutching
Tight at your belt, stride through the length of heaven,
The dog star yelping at your heels, beyond
The rainy Hyades.

Thrusting back the stars
Seek the farthest corner of the sky
Where the red of Mars dulls like a sumac leaf
The wind turns over, and Aldebaran
Is as a tiny flame seen flickeringly
In the deep wilderness of a friend's eye;
Where the hours with which we torture out our lives
On the cruel rack of days drift by like clouds
Casual in noon, beyond the sight
Of men who look to the sky and call with white
Teeth for rain.

And I can be alone
With your great golden body, where the bright
Fillet of the Milky Way is bound

CAT'S EYE



IF SUDDENLY blackness crawled
Over the world and the sun hurtled down
The vast and verge of space until it glowed
No bigger than a cat's eye in the night,
And wind beat the bruised face of earth with awful
Tornado-clubbing fists, and all the waters
Rose in a leaping body to the heavens
Tidally challenging the moon, and then
With foaming, gibbering mouth went howling over
The shuddering plains and ocean bottoms:

If stars

Splattered and dashed the sky, and the moon wallowed
Dark without the sun, and I were the last
Man moving through the streets of towns the tiny
Pale hands of men had fashioned, and out of the shouting
Air and split space and trembling earth a voice
Asked softly what one thing I wished to see
Before the universe grew tense and cracked
To the core, and burst beyond the farthest gaunt
Galaxies of the heavens, I would plead
That through the shadow there would loom the friendly
White magnificence of a human face.

EARTH IN OUR BLOOD



AND WHO are we, young, strange to the world's way,
Our nerves yet curious at the hand's touch,
Our faces glad for wind, for warmth of a day,
Eagerly caught with color, bright with such
Shining of sun, bright flame builded on sea,
Our bodies for the peace of sleep, for breath
Born out of frost, for that eternity
Of earth strong in our blood, to speak of death?

Not to wonder, feel, wish life, is the one crime
For us whose hearts have no hurt and no grief
That cleanly the certain surgery of time
Will not heal with its hands of days long fled.
O rich rain-blooded earth! O sun-greened leaf!
Only the dead should talk about the dead.

II

There is a spirit in us that has sprung
From the nostalgic memory of the race—
The feel of certain words under the tongue,
The infinite features of the human face,

Remembrance of wind cruel cold in the bone,
The songs of men and all their wailful crying,
The strange thoughts of a child left all alone,
A long eternity of birth and dying.

We live by no mind that is only reason,
For there are in us strengths older than thought—
Memory of moon-earthed seeds, the treason
Of spring in our hearts, old family-named corn lands—
Eternal in us as ancestral wrought
Curve of our thigh and the gripped shape of hands.

NOON



NOON is the brittle time of men, the deep
Sky of morning and its soft clouds tighten
Until with afternoon they crack and spill
Coolness and shadow on the earth. The silence
Of all things living is a tiny shout
Faint and far off, and the lives of men grow tense
When a man's work is halted for an hour
And he becomes a voiceless shadow under
The flaming tree of noon, and he cannot raise
A sudden hand for fear that it will shatter
The tautened air and the stretched wind that twists
Like a coiled spring.

In noon the secret self
Turns inward, groping for the darkest walls
Of the sun-assaulted mind where it may hide
Away from light, away from life, away
From the harsh searching hands of other men.
This is the time when the simple soul is ample
Unto itself and spurns the human touch
That would betray it to the curious
World from which it flees like the running, grey
Lithe body of cornfield dust before the shouting
Hunters of the wind.

Even speech becomes
Tight-lipped and forced, a man will no more
Speak of himself than the shy wood thrush startled
By a strange sound will utter even its briefest
Quiet song.

The wide soul of a man
Shrivels, beneath the beating sun of heaven,
Into a hardened mockery of itself
That cannot find the power that destroys it,
That cannot see with sun-scared eyes the wild
Incredible empty splendor of high noon.

MARY



YOU SAID I would forget you, forget your lithe
Body thrusting the night-black water, lifted
On the long swell of the current, the strong feet beating;
Forget you, brown as the granite-crumbled beach,
Running on the wave-hard sand, forget
The way down river with our paddles flinging
Wild and flashing moonlight

You were wrong,
For always now I see you, always swimming
With body supple as a diving otter's
Churning a wake of pale foam in the torn
And tideless estuaries of my mind
Where the sly fish of memory leap and shatter
The quiet water, their dark scales gleaming.

PLEDGE TO EARTH



AND so I give you now this witnessed note
Promissory, earth, of all my debt
These years accumulated:

To you and your
Assignees (O trampling space and harrying heaven,
Stars and wild comets and night-desirous moon)
I pledge, at death, my body, this my flesh
Briefly borrowed from you, in payment full
For life, for this tumultuous proud life:

First for this five-senseful body, for
These hands that with the air and rain mingle
Deeper than bone, these eyes to which the light
Plunges its straight and tangled images,
These gatherers of the wind-thrusted sound
Making it meaningful, these lips shaping words
Twisted and tumbled by the tongues of men
To the articulation of our dreams,
And for these nostrils curving to the odors
Of moist ploughed fields, of clover, and the clean
Smell of milked cattle:

For this mind that takes
The gravel gathered at the river's edge

Of all my days, and sifts the thin white sand
Of ecstasy, to leave the great dull stones
Of stupid times.

Earth, you have been kind
To this one portion of you—In the black
Night before the first warm moon of spring
I have felt you moving through me as the April
Water soaked the leaf mold. You were no
Spirit, no ghostly presence prowling through
The rich fields of fertility: You were earth,
The strong force of increase, the lupin flower,
The season-circled oak, the brown quail startled,
And you were the huge body of the day
Sinewed with sunlight, ribbed with wind, your naked
Thighs kneeling on my eyes.

I have scaled, O earth,
Your mountains, swum your rivers, tramped your plains,
Dug deep in you and sown, ploughed and reaped,
Slept in your arms and beaten you with fists
Bitter with sorrow, touched leaf and fur and finger,
Eaten the food that is your body, drunk
The water flowing through you—O white blood,
Your life and mine.

For this great debt I promise
When death, that is your good right hand, shall clench
The life from me, this blood and bone and flesh
Shall give you their brief sustenance, and I,
My debt discharged, under the mighty thumb
Of time will vanish and become again
Portion complete and indivisible
In the breath and body of exultant earth.

★
★ ★ ★
★ Fire at Viareggio ★
★ ★ ★
★

For L. E.

FIRE AT VIAREGGIO



AND YOU, NOW, bold men who speak of life,
Call it a huddle of breath against the world
Thrown with a tiny cry, or a pale arm
Thrust up into the dawn, hard fist clenching
The soft palm white, or a lonely bell beaten
Slowly in the evening till the echoed
Overtone recchoes and tears out
The tongue from the bronze throat.

But I would rather
Talk of the struck flint calling out to steel
And of the live spark answering, of how
The great Promethean hand of Time has snatched
The fire of life from the god-guarded hall
Of slow eternity, and held it up
As a defiant light to roam the dark
And friendless world.

If you would speak of life
Call it flame—O call it pure flame!

Shelley,
Proud spirit of wild parents, fiercely born
Out of the union of the sun and rain
(Peace, Heraclitus, you who thought in fire

And walked with it the Grecian avenues
To weigh in the delicate scales of the mind your life
And balance wet with dry until you found
The soul triumphant over its own flame),
Found, as always, in the English air
Only the steady glow and not the heat,
Only the ruddy-colored wall of light
And not the radiant tower, the dazzling stair
Up which his eagerness might leap, to burst
The glowing ceiling, riveted with thunder,
And hurl away from the cold earth his heart,
To turn in the void sky, and there, defiant
Not only of the world but of the human
Self that bore it, cast in the sun's wild face
Its blazing arrogance, and find in flame
Its strong integrity—So Shelley left
The dark land with its soft, rain-mellowed fields
And made again the ancient pilgrimage
To the Italian shore where sky burned gold
And sea burned blue.

(There is a quietness in earth
That is the certain primitive old strength
Of one globed power that, in a universe
Sired by chaos, has so many ages
Thrust its shining ploughshare in the wide
Fields of heaven, forever turning up
A clean, straight-running furrow. There is even
A quietness in water, whether falling
Down the smooth throat of rivers, or riding on
The lean and light-pierced crest of waves, or groping
A slow worm progress on a surf-bent beach,
That is the firm repose of motion worked
Smoothly out. And in the turbulent air,

Whose ravenous, long-fingered winds, forever
Tear unavailingly the raveled sky
Tranquil with eternity, there lives
A peace that is the spirit of a white
Body whose hollow members cannot move
Alone, but when one stirs and rises up
All others shudder in their unity.

But not in fire, O never in the restless
Welter of flame that cries and climbs and will not
Hush its shouting till the fuel is spent
And all the clamorous life is tumbled down
To soft greyness, is quiet found.)

Shelley,

Walking on the sand at Spezia, knew
That there was something in his life which often
Threw light across the dark room of his mind,
And if he turned the chill face of his pain
Imploringly up to it, would give it
A little warmth. And he had seen at times
In England its bright shadow cutting through
A distant corner of his life, but here
Where the Italian sun bent down from heaven
And gripped him with its gaunt and golden arms
He had seen the blinding image in its shape
And heard it (Rise, O skylark, from the fields
Of earth into the song-created sky
Of immortality) in lonely hours.

And now he knew that if a single end
Was somewhere waiting in the distant road
Down which the laughter-footed hours forever
Ran with a shout, it was that he was fated,

Of all men of his time, to thrust his hands
Bravely into the cringing, bitter depths
Of man, to where the violent human spirit
Burned in clear flame, and then, his hands made pure,
Upon the living anvil of the mind
With the imagination's mighty sledge
And all the west wind gathered in his bellows,
Beat the hard and glowing iron of words
Into a bright and tearing sword of song
That would, as long as men had speech to swing it,
Glitter against the huddling dark of time,
And hang in the common doorway of the world
For every bent and sorrow-beaten man
To lift it up and with an eager cry
Plunge its dazzling point into his heart
Where it could meet the dull fire of his self
And hurl it up—O strong flame fed on flame!

While the white, wave-hurled lightning of the surf
Leapt from the sea and struck the jogged beach,
Shelley followed it with slower steps,
Turning the fire-born vision in his heart
Against the utter blackness of the night
Fallen into the ocean, and knew again
That the bright flame that he had sought in England
Was not alone the symbol of his life
But portion of the general scheme of things
In which his own life mingled—

For the course
Of earth was one long worship of the sun,
An unremitting circle in the sky
Around its mighty fire, like a lean wolf
Living on all the weak, cast-off, and strayed,

Closing softly in, till the curved path narrowed
At the spring equinox, and the lone hunter
Caught the elk herd's hot breath, and suddenly
The great and many-branching golden antlers
From the staring face that always turned toward his
Lunged—but the supple runner fled, and his track
Widened away to winter, lest those horns
Should hurl his body writhing into space
To let its cracked bones whiten and give over
To the murderous, quick fire of dissolution.
Even the mocking, flame-despising sea
Whose leaping thunder nothing could restrain
Marched frenziedly against the empty shore
In the tide's mad, methodical ambition
Of hurling up forever craving arms
To the frozen firelight of the yellow moon.

It was a strange, relentless kind of fire
That burned now always with him everywhere,
For it was both the dream that he had often
Seen far off in the vague hills of his life
And the inexorable force that drove him
To seek that dream (he had touched it once in Keats
Calling it white radiance of eternity
That now was shattered) and bind it in his heart
With the life-woven rope of blood and song.

So looked across the cold, moon-glimmering ocean
For one last time, and turned again to bank
The else long burned-out fire of life with sleep.

Next morning with the sail unfurled, the keel
Splitting the parted water like the breast
Of a lean hawk cutting the solid air, he drove

Out to the sea, spurning the humble earth
Where the fixed hills moved immemorially
No farther than the little yearly knife
Of the slow seasons with a dulling edge
Crumbled them away.

Here on the waves
Was the heart's exaltation, and its peace
Torn out of motion. Here was the final swing
Of the long pendulum of life, one end
At the great fire of the gigantic sun
Blazing its golden energy, the other
At the earth-bounded crest of the proud ocean
That lay and watched its sunlight-tawny side
Breathe like a tired beast, and in the center
The frail, inconstant point of human life
Held in a mighty balance.

Shelley rushed
On through the water, seeing on every wave,
Where the sun kindled in the driven foam
Its glittering and day-doomed fires, the brief
Image of his vision, ever running
Ahead of him with unreluctant feet
To draw him on. Even the wind became
A taut rope tied at one end to the sun
And at the other held in Shelley's hands
To pull him onward.

And now he had lost
The living wood of his body and assumed
The nature of a universal spirit
Shaped of ecstatic flame. The waves had clenched
Their fists until the knuckles whitened, wind
Tore at the mast, the sun gave up its light,
The thin plank cracked, and through the gaping boards

Rushed the enormous hatred of the sea,
Battering the boat, beating the man
Beneath its hollow body.

Then in one
Glaring instant Shelley saw above him
A great and glittering sword that was his dream
Of mankind's fiery spirit, shaped and beaten
For once into an image that the eyes
Could bear to look on and the hands to grasp,
The sword it would have been his destiny
To have hammered out through all the running years,
An image of the general heart of man
As hard as steel and as intense as flame.
He seized it eagerly, and with a cry
Of hopeless courage, plunged the unbearable blade
Into his own frail heart, driving it down
Clean to the bloody braving hilt.

A crash
Of water leapt above him and he went
Limp in its heavy grasp. The sword paled out
To an agony of ripping in his breast,
And all the fire that once had been his life
And burned and wavered through his living eyes
Crumbled to blackness, and the tearing teeth
Of the sea met in his body, pulling him down
To the terrible unbalance that is death.

(Sleep, Heraclitus, you have found your own.
Forever, you said, the elements contend,
And now has water triumphed over fire.
Sleep, but you soon shall wake.)

For now the sea
Had its way with him until its fury waned,

Tired of rending such a helpless thing,
And in its ancient spite for earth, cast up
Its waste to the friendly and unmoving shore.

They found him there, and built on the foreign beach
A pyre, and laid him on it, and a friend
Struck the fire-tipped match—the blaze leapt up
Over the wood and touched the flesh. An arm
Lunged in and tore the heart out (O Trclawny,
Then you held the purest flame that ever
England has kindled—O true heart of hearts!).
And so the final conquest of the fire
Defied the water and hurled back the sea,
And that which for a handful of brief hours
Had lost the vital spirit of its being
Found at last its fit and fiery end,
By flame created and by flame destroyed.

But still they cannot call you dead, O Shelley,
For we yet have the living fire of you
To cast its fitful shadow through the cold
Chambers of our hearts—And now there burns
On the hill of ~~our future's~~ dark uncertainty,
Forever against the black sky of our grief,
Your leaping and immortal flame of song.



For R. H. and E. F.

BROADWAY RAIN



I WALKED in rain
Till I was rain
Shouting and crashing
Madly, insane
With a wild dashing
Over rail, over stone
Silverly splashing—

My body was bone,
Blood, flesh, and cry
Of the rain spirit
From cloud, from sky
Flung, though it fear it—
The beating to death
On the hard pavement
Knowing in one breath
What an earth grave meant
For the rain life
That, though it die, never
Will disdain life
But would forever
Live in its falling

Through wind, through sun,
Through white crane's calling.

When it was done
And the body flowed
Through eaves and gutters
And fingers glowed
Dripping from shutters
I rose from the place
Where I had lain,
Found hand and face
And lost the rain.

If tomorrow
The rain fling down
Its silver sorrow
On field and town
I will dissolve
Utterly,
In storm involve,
Mutter, be
Cry of rain and
Eternal beat
On tree and pane and
Roof and street.

CONEY ISLAND



TWO MEN and I walked down the windy beach
Where the coiled water wore the pale sand smooth,
Watching the gull curve and the wave cry soothe
The bent mind, the bitter hands of each.

One said—Nothing, not the crying of men, is old
As the crying of the sea.

One said—Nothing on earth can be as cold
As the heart of me.

I thought—Nothing can be told
How these men's grief may be.

With little life to share
Two men and I moved, where
Over the flung white sand
The waves walked, hand in hand.

HARLEM AIRSHAFT'



MORNING

IN THE MORNING there is sleep,
Clinging to the window sill by fingers,
Startled from bed by clocks and slipping loose
With blinds drawn up and deep
Shoulder-stretching yawns and dreams
Told between a trouser leg and toast,
Until the banging of a host
Of doors, commuter's reveille,
Breaks that grip
And the hands slip
Free—
And the body of another night's
Sleep is crushed on the court,
Lies huddled while bright day
Stabs with its brilliant knives until the lights
Of supper windows and the eyes of grey
Garbage mice bring on the dark
To soothe the nerves of sleep and let it mark
Along the shaft another resting place
Where it may stay

The bitter night away
On a human face.

NOON

Tatters of lives fall down the long
Shaft in the raveled sunlight, torn
From the coiled lengths of selves by worn
Thumbs of old days lived out, mingle with *so* *ing*,
Toe-itching melodies that soon
From the radio will serenade the noon,
Mister Oguri's cough, the smell
Of onions sizzling over talk
Of crooners, skirts, and cash, the bell
Of Betty calling from the Bronx—
Yeh, this is Eddie. What th' hell?—
With t b. Al's pale hands of chalk
Clutching the window catch, a sheet
Of paper caught where the wires meet,
Beating the balk
Of the wind, a desperate butterfly
Of want ads, murders, printer's pi.

TWILIGHT

Dusk comes early in the shaft,
An hour before the whistles and the first
Radios have laughed
Enticingly of cigarettes and soup,
And supper cans have burst
Condensed and desiccated food for Jim,
Home from work in time to hear the worst
Tiny tragedies his wife will tell to him
Of gas-pipe leaks and Mrs. Bailey's first.

With sunset, night
Flattens its black face on the windowpane,
Staring and waiting for the moment when
A switch is pulled, to throttle out the light,
To leap against the throats of tired men,
To stretch them on the bed, subdue the brain,
And drag its shapeless body through the house,
Driving its shadows with a dark disdain
Until it rests, triumphant over every part,
And takes a ticking clock for heart.

★
★ ★
The
★ Troubadour of Eze ★
★ ★
★

*For S. and E.
Eze Village, Alpes Maritimes, France*

THE TROUBADOUR OF EZE



HERE WHERE THE SKY comes down, friendly and blue,
To the groves of olive, where the mountains fall
Into the hills and the hills into the sea,
And the sea into the deep abyss of earth,
Is a little town. And seeing it I have known
That there is a mighty fate that hammers out
The iron form of continents, breaking
The stubborn back of nations, bending kings,
Shaping the whole bright world in its hands,
That every place of earth where men have lived
Makes of its life a song, and that of Eze
Is one long monotone of misery,
For every folk of the south has triumphed here
And every one been pillaged by the next.

*In my town, O far, happy dream,
Unthought of when the walls of Eze
Were ancient and the lurking cat
Of grief had hurled its mocking scream
Down moon-worn streets to man and rat
Uncounted centuries, a fate
Has worked, but tenderly, for there*

*In the long prairie where the plough
Can turn a mile-long furrow straight
Into rich loam, and the apple bough
Is gnarled with fruit, its towers have sent
Their lunging pride into the sky
In peace, and though its life is long
Only as one brief shadow bent
From tumbled rocks at Eze, its song
Is a glad rising and a cry
Of new lands brief in human wrong
That build with hope their homes, and after
Raise above them joy and laughter.*

Who knows what creatures first came up from the sea
To burrow wretched shelter in the rock,
Three quarters brute, one vital quarter man?
These the Phœnicians, rising like a sun from the east
To blazon out the red dawn of the sword
Over the lands, their ships like hungry gulls
Swarming the water for a scrap of prey
Destroyed.

*There was a strange and unknown race,
Great, gaunt ghost from the verge of time,
The first to settle and dig a place
Deep in the rich American earth,
To beat out metal and fashion clay—
These left their bones in a beast-shaped mound
When down from the long Aleutian way
Came a red folk who took the ground
Where the copper bowls and the wide skulls lay,
And the wind reechoed night and day
With the dark god's chant and the arrow's sound.*

And the Romans, bringing Roman gods,
Came and made this thumb of stone a portion
Of the vast hand of empire reaching out
To clench the world, following every point
Of every wind to its ultimate source in earth,
And up to heaven and down to hell, if certain
Cæsars had had their way. With them a temple
Of Isis rose to the sun, and the chants of the goddess
Were called in the night, the occult rites performed.
Here in this room where olive roots are stored
What mysteries, what savage divination
In the guts of a bird, what human sacrifice,
The death cries beating on the wall where cats
Yowl in their courting? And the electric
Switch, did not there the golden-hammered basin
To catch the hot and dripping blood once hang?

*The Spaniard came and the Spanish horse
Neighed in the never-trampled plain,
Cruel-lipped men with a single course--
Gold! cried their hearts, and their armor glittered
Gold! while they burned the scanty grain
And in the high city of the god
Tore his temple down and littered
The human-scavenged streets with dead.
The only gold they found was the yellow
Curse of fever in the head
And the fiery sun's enormous bellow.
But they brought their god, and the slow attrition
Of time has left us yet the mellow
Walls of the 'dobe-builded mission.*

And the Lombards, as one gluttcd wolf is followed
By another at the common carrion feast,

Seized for their own the little whitened houses
Splattered like bird-lime on the mountain side,
Holding them two bitter centuries
Till the black-bearded Saracens came to beach
Their cruel ships in the bay and climb the hill
Where killer was slain by killer. And they built
The first castle, enslaved the people, robbed,
Burned, murdered, tortured, and finally
Left the village to the quarreling towns
Who fought for it like mongrel dogs scratching
An ash heap for a bone.

*The French came for the beaver fur
And brought the Crucifix—the Mass
Was said in the wilderness, the stir
Of hawks in the trees, of wolves in the grass
Muffling the Latin, while the priest
Dipped his hand in the common pot
And slept with the dogs, to find his least
Pain in watching his sick feet rot
In the neck-deep snow. They took the land
And gave it to God with sword and prayer
While the Indian found the white man's hand
Double—his saviour and his slayer.*

The Ghibellines,
The Guelfs, Provence, Monaco, Anjou, Naples
Bought, sold, and reigned, and at the last
Amadeus of Savoy five hundred
Years ago purchased the rock, the clustered
Houses, and the people skilled in grief.

So it remained, a tiny group of roofs
And slanting rooms that stuck on the cliff, huddled

Together like children frightened of the dark,
And fate that, like a buzzard, naked-necked.
Had swooped down from the dizzy mountain peaks
Or beat up from the sea, with curving talons
Ravenous to tear joy from the heart
And stone from stone, relented, only to leave
A greater curse on Eze—that it should have
Not the dignity of utter waste,
Nor even the dubious tribute to be robbed,
But safe and absolute obscurity,
Where life should be secure, and mean and small,
Where generation unto generation
Of cats and men should scavenge for their food
In the thin soil, and breed their kind to cling
To their own unique and bastard patois

*The English armies marched and shattered
The frail French power, and America fought
The English till the redcoats scattered
From Maine to Georgia, and there was brought
Out of the ripping pain of war
A new world nation, and men began
Their plunging through the Ohio door
Into the greater West where ran
Vast herds of bison over vast
Plains with rivers so large that one
Could have watered alone a continent.
But as the wagons lurched and passed,
A few stopped where a river bent
Deep to the west and the teams were ferried,
And my town was built, the soil was rent,
The shingles split and the timber carried.
It grew in quiet, with only trade,*

*Building, the simple life of breath
Drawn on breath, and quick Time flung
Over the tree-lined streets its swinging
Pendulum of birth and death.
Where once the steps of Eze had run
Black with human blood, the ringing
Sword had cried, here the silver
Prairie rain flows down, the sun
Shouts to life. At Eze the symbol,
Hush, O Moorish pipe and timbrel,
Of all its beaten folk have done
Is the pitiful lifting of a hand,
While of my town the eager sign
Is a strong fist over the river sand
Lifted to seize, beyond the far
Mingling of sky and hill in a line,
Cloud or sun or moon or star.*

Here were once the troubadours, Blacas
And Blacasette the father, in that time
When all Provençal speech was song, and laughter
Ran in the land. Here is a verse I found
By Blacas, a song of Eze, soft and clear
Above the din, the rattling choke of death:

This is the lovely season,
The shining weather and the song of birds
Give me joy without end.
To be loved as much as I love would be reason,
My dear, kind friend,
For happiness. But since there will
Nothing good befall me—What do I know?
Only that I shall wait until
I die, pleading still,
Because she wills it so.

*There was a far time when there rang
Forever in the plains a song,
And passing through my town men sang
Of their own living, of the long
Westward trail, and every word
Was not, like those of Eze, a flute
Piping the thin calls of a bird,
But the hard syllables of a horn,
Not the light leaf, but the tough root,
Missouri Waltz, Turkey in the Straw,
Oh, Susanna, in the valley of the Kaw.
American troubadour, hard-born
From the travail of cruel work and danger,
Death-despiser, proud earth-ranger,
Singing on banjos, the memory-torn
Heart sick for home in the lonely night
By prairie fires of buffalo chips,
To the low of the ox with the twisted horn
And rattlesnakes hissing as their bright
Eyes were flicked out by the long bull whips,
Sing again in your long twilight
Your gay song, keen as the point of a thorn:*

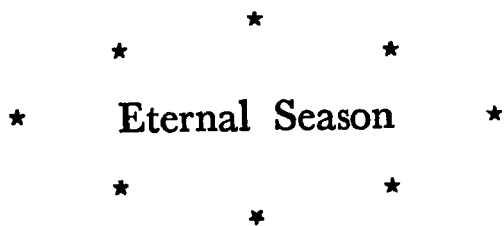
I had a dream the other night
When everything was still,
I thought I saw Susanna
A-coming down the hill
The buckwheat cake was in her mouth,
The tear was in her eye,
Says I, "I'm coming from the South,
Susanna, don't you cry.

"Oh, Susanna, Oh, don't you cry for me,
I've come from Alabama wid my banjo on my knee."

High on this point of rock, this mighty needle
Sewing the multitudinous cloths of wind,
Where the living and the Roman eagles soared,
I will not think of all the history
That loosed its rainfall here, but I will grasp
The living present, seek the now, not in
The ruined walls of Eze, but in my town.
For there, in a land new to man's destruction,
Is a far greater building to be done
Than piling stone and laying out a room—
There, with the blue steel chisel of the mind
Shaped by the hammer of a new world's dream,
And tempered in the clear flame of the heart,
There can be carved, from the quarried stone of time,
A proud and shining symbol of new life,
Not a fixed figure like the signs of Europe,
But a moving body that will run the plains,
Swim the Mississippi, climb the Rockies,
Hurl the plunging piston in its cycle,
Twist the steel-town smoke into a rope
And stride on it across the continent
With a chimney stack balanced in each hand,
Take living steam for breath, and for its blood
Electric current with wild sunlight mingled.

Here to my town has the world's great power come over
The torn, dream-furrowed ocean, and now waits
A stronger form that the new world alone
Can give to its old and proud nobility.
But if my town, like Eze, should fail, and leave
No nobler symbol than a fallen stone,
The world fails with it, and it will be best
To swing the huge, gnarled war club that is doom

And crush again the patient walls of Eze,
Hurl into its centuries-quiet mouth
The half-remembered chant of misery,
Forget that new world image, and beat back
The tōwers of all our tōwns into the earth.



For E. B.

SIGNATURE OF SPRING



IT HAD BEEN a long time, you had not answered
Either my last letter or the many others
Addressed to April, somewhere in the world.
I remember your sudden going, the evenings early and
crisp
With the frost-fathering air under a red moon
Rich with the winy odor of apples trampled
Under the rain, the hay dried in the loft
Where the dust still smelt of the abandoned sun,
The long rifles of corn stacked, the yellow
Cartridges stored, the martial ground that bore them
From the first drilling asleep in the ancient
Peace of crop-conquered, life-succumbing earth.
There were also the wild blue eyes of grapes
Staring at autumn.

I wrote you moons ago
Saying that memory of you would be long
In my mind, but would not the time be brief
Until I saw again your pale green smoke
Smoulder along the hazel hills—O living
Flame of spring—and felt your soothing hands
Pierce my quick flesh and stroke the nervous bone.

There was no answer; only the frost, moving
Its silver wires through the intricate earth,
Tested their strength to bear the pole-flowing
Current of winter cold.

Again I wrote you,
Beseeching a slight thing to keep you with me
Always, an early-flowering iris stalk
That would not bloom but would forever curl
Perpetual blue in its unfolding buds.
There was only the white fist of ice, its unjointed
Fingers clenching the earth.

I last wrote hardly
A fortnight ago, while the north trampling wind
Beat its benumbed hands on the hills till they
Tingled, and breath for the lungs was a solid
Thing that the teeth sank in, asking you
To send no message, no lingo of re-creative
Life scrawled in vast letters on the land,
But one short word, a symbol you had not forgotten
This man, this friend of your last passing through
The clover field two fences behind his house,
Some sign you yet remembered the eternal
Way of spring in the world.

Today, walking
Under a willow, I found the green sliver
Of a wild tawny tiger lily thrusting
The soil, and I knew your secret knife had split
The wood of earth thinly.

It was a strong
Feel in my heart to read again your subtle
Signature scribbled in my barren field.

ETERNAL SEASON



SPRING is the eternal season, knowing
The annual memory of the sun recalls
Forgotten earth, and the wide heaven-haunting
Orbit narrows toward this land, these hills
Where the fingers of the ginseng, mad with rain,
Break the leaf crust and become bare hands,
These streets where the windows bloom new curtains, the
 children
Splatter bare feet.

 We have seen the leaf
Charged with high crime by autumn, tried and slain,
The lean side pierced with the shining spear of frost,
The body lowered on the arms of wind
And hidden in the ground. Now has the great
Stone been rolled back, for today we faithful saw
That leaf stand on the willow—Look! This crimson
Scar on the bud—and knew with eyes the ancient
Resurrection and the life.

 Old men
Forsake the windows that their beards have whitened
Winter long, and from dark halls and rooms
Fumble at the great door of sunlight, which

Opening, they sit on steps and drowse
Their pipes away. Surely in the spring
The change in them is greater, for the young
Come to us from life, but these years dreamful .
Elders come from death.

In the evening we watch

Moonlight move forever over the oval
Faces of girls until our heavy hands
Tear it away to touch the shadows under.
On the small meadow streams the tiny turtles
Ride to the river where the minnows march
Over the heron's toes that mark the sand bar's
Winter shifting.

So again we remember

Time in the earth—O mortal mood!

But then,

Hearing beyond our sight the sudden, dawn-startled
Tangle of bird cries and the shouting sun
Strike us with light, the wind in our lungs wet,
Trampling the dew—O then we, knowing no
Death but the life-split moth worm born to doom,
Clutch the conviction of eternity.

Earth spinning after it, that energy
That mates the eagle on the mountain peak,
The elk beneath the pine, you seem, frail Death,
No stronger than this river water I
Silverly shatter with my foot, than this
Old autumn leaf the yelping hounds of wind
Harry across the heavens.

On this day
When life bursts through the world, and soil and flesh
Reel to contain it; when the sun tears water
Out of the sea and hurls it to the clouds—
You are, Death, on this eager day when crows
Clatter above the seeded field at dawn
Their rain-presaging cries; when the sun-seeking
Sparrow hawks, maddened with mating, mount and soar
Beyond the sunlight; when the cedar roots,
Groping for rain, split rock—on this day you are
Deeply defied with living.

You are the only
Mortal thing; this morning strong with life
Brings death to you, Death.

Now in this world through which
The pulse of spring moves like a living blood
Down through the frost-split arteries of earth,
Up in the slender body of the wind,
Hollowly veined with the vireo's flight, to urge
Its various beat through dog-tooth violet,
Quail in the valley, great horse ploughing the hill,
There is only life. Death, you were the shadow
Cast by the living of the earth that now
Are utterly involved in the vast light
Of spring, that will be shadowless until
Life and that light dissolve.

Not even with twilight
Will you return, for then the multitudes
Of living forms, then every hungry thing
To mock you, Death, will take life from the long
Hands of moonlight fumbling in the hills.

★
★ ★
★ Thou Shalt Thresh ★
the Mountains
★ ★
★

Fo, N. F.

CISTERCIAN MONASTERY



THESE HAVE cast the world away, as some
Would cast, not with regret, but joyfully,
A loathful memory from the mind and leave
Only the gladness and the ecstasy.
There is as much of quiet in their hearts
As in this barren building. Here, alone
With but the everlasting godhead, they
Worship His Son, who could not sire their own.
Here there is peace, I think, as Brother Pius
Bows to the Virgin—Till the vespers toll
And suddenly I grow homesick for the rush
Of restless eager men, for the long roll
Of traffic in the auto-harried street
And the soft night where men and women meet.

FOR HARRY WHEN HE IS SAD



MARK a ray of sunlight—take it
Between your hands and beat
Earth and yourself to break it
Gold on your face and feet.

Gather from the yielding land
Roots of purple thistle;
Go out in early dawn to stand
In clover fields and whistle.

Watch again the hovering swallow,
Under cloud and over sea,
Hurl its song into the hollow
House of hill and tree.

Trample your bare feet into
Bitter leaves of sorrel;
Wander all the valleys through
Where wind and water quarrel.

Pluck the glaring eye of sorrow,
Throw it from your mind,

Lct the clean sunlight of tomorrow
Burn it staring and blind.

Loose on the barren mountain rocks
The scrawny goats of sadness;
Graze on the long green grass in flocks
The white sheep of your gladness.

COMPLAINT TO SAD POETS



WILL you never be done with barking at the moon
Through the bleak hours of silver-blackened night?
With baying from the low hills of your lives
Your ancient bitterness into the moon's
Cold and magnificent contempt?

Will you
Always fear the world until you pour
The strong wine of self-pity down your throats,
Wiping your lips with trembling hands, and then,
Drunk with the sickening liquor of yourselves,
Find the yellow courage to stand up
A feeble hour? And when the warm strength runs
Out of your belly and you plainly see
The simple end of things lunging its bright
Blade at your heart, fling your head on the table
And drown it in the dark wave of your arms?

The terrier bitch that whelped its litter today
Under the barn where the dirt is moist and dark
Shames and defies you with the quiet logic
Of life that works its ancient way out, knowing
No fulness but to live, strongly to live.

And take not for your symbol the gaunt moon,
Thief of the light that gives it being. Live
No, forever in the furtive night,
The time when the lone mind turns cat and prowls
The alleys and back fences of the world,
Yowling aloof despair. But take the sun
Which every day reminds us we were born
Out of its brazen body, that we live
Hung in the windy branches of its light,
To be the mighty image of your lives.

Live in the glaring day until the arms
Of the shy self reach upward to embrace
The wide, wind-trampled archway of the sky.
Go out in noon and bare the head, to let
The golden bludgeons of the sun beat back
The flame of life again into your face,
Now paled with pity.

Where the sunlight sinks
Its immemorial columns in the earth,
Build the tall temple of your faith, and open
The heart till its impregnable old towers
Are groined with light, and all the moats run gold.

Cry, sons of earth, blaspheming your parentage,
But know that when your futile lives are done
Death will despise you who have despised life

THE BRIGHT QUARTZ



LET THE HANDS of thought reach out
To touch the world's hard stone,
Roughness of a wall, the body's
Flesh and bone,

Raveling into threads the woven
Rain, and wavering
In branches at a squirrel's long-toothed
Quavering.

Let them gently pull the silken
Tassel out of corn,
Lift a purple columbine's
Wind-muted horn,

Touch a sparrow hawk's flung feather,
Run lightly over sand,
And life-deep furrows in an old
Man's withered hand;

Then seek beyond the eye the pebble
Of the self, and find

Its hard quartz buried in the soft
Earth of the mind.

Let those hands lower it where flowing
Waters wash away
The gathered dust of all the acts
Of every day,

Let it be scraped on oak tree bark,
Let fire burn it lean,
The rain wash it and the wind
Blow it clean.

Then place it in the heart's wide heaven
Where the five senses turn
Like glowing planets, to be the sun
Of self, and burn

Clean the fallow stubble field
Of the mind, and mounting higher
From the imagination's rock
Strike living fire.

THE BOXER



A SINGLE POWER of rock
Hurled up the peaks, arms lifted from the same
Mountainous shoulders to embrace the wind
And crush its crying body to their hard
Bellies of tautened granite, and a tongue
Of water leapt between drawn lips of stone
Mumbling the incantations of all earth
Whose life is motion against fixity.
Here quick-footed space leapt in, its fists
Beating the heavy lunging of the rock,
O skillful boxer parrying earth.

“Nothing
Can come between us now,” you said. “Not even
Our separate selves can leave the hidden house
Of the mind to wander in the lonely air
And crawl between us like the ghosts of doom.”

Till, in a downstream valley, you suddenly turned
And shouted, “O, the moss, a green wind blowing
Quietly out of the earth.” And thrusting off
Your shoes, you ran along the yielding turf.
Though I called out to you, “Come back, come back,”

You only shouted, "O, how soft! It is like
Running over wind."

And instantly

I knew^o again the inevitable law
Of man, that the one heart is doomed forever
To its own bitter self-sufficiency—
The ancient and relentless truth, that there
Are immemorial mountains of the mind
Where life shudders on the wind-abandoned edge,
The thin air stabbing the lungs, and other men
Are birds nesting the bare rock, their long cries beating
The silence like great wings.

O, there is the wild

Passionless calm of space, the purity
Of the lone spirit's mad magnificence.

REMEMBERING NAMES



THERE'S something in a place
Besides the curving of the land
Or the way trees lean or a wall
Guards flowers that would not think to run away.
There's something more than memory of a hand
Waved sadly in the evening, or a face
Turned whitely to the moonlight, or the fall
Of golden leaves all through a windy day.

It is the name that is the heart
Of a place a man recalls with a certain start
As a familiar sound heard on a train;
Or letters spelling out a little town
(Whose dogs he knew, whose streets he once walked down)
Postmarked across a stamp
Or seen through rain
On a signpost underneath a lamp.
And that is why
Sadder than a youth
Recalling his childhood's careless games
Or the bitter yielding up of hope to truth
Is an old man remembering names.

THE RAGGED CLOTH



LET NOT the hands be troubled:
Let the mind
Be agonized with living till the eyes
Under the beating hammers of the light
Go staring and blind; till the ears turn deaf
Against the bird cry, the unbearable
Calling of a human voice, the clatter
Of traffic over stone, till the skin shudder
To touch elusive water or the ragged
Cloth of hickory bark; till the nostrils tight
Close against the honeysuckle's mild
Odor like a soft voice, the broken
Smell of a cut plum branch:

But never let
The mind be tortured till it lift the hands
And batter them together till they forget
The body that has borne them and become
Separate living selves that turn away
From the simple earth and call up to the sky
Their pale despair of life:

I can bear
The eyes empty of image, the gibbering mouth

Mocking the twisted mind, the ears that do not
Know even their own tongue's voice, the face
Flat as a leaf, of idiots, but not
Their wavering, wind-fumbling hands, beating
The comet-bolted door of sky, threading
The rapid needles of the sunlight, hands
Darting the ocean of the air, wringing
Life like an old rag, clutching the long
Hair of the wind:

Let the brittle bone
Bend and be shattered, and the beaten mind
Anguish:

But never till the hands be troubled.

★ ★ ★
★ America Remembers ★
★ ★ ★

For G. F. N.

(Awarded the prize for the best poem about the Centúry
of Progress Exposition at Chicago, 1933, by *Poeîry: A
Magazine of Verse.*)

AMERICA REMEMBERS



HERE BY THIS midland lake, the sand-shored water
That pulses with no sea-tide heart, where the grain
Of a nation pauses on its golden way
To the world's belly, and the long trains plunge—
From the honey-hearted South (*O go down, Moses*),
From the land of the shining mountains, the cloud-high
West where the Indian god and the Indian ghest
Ride down the Montana wind, from the England-scigning
States beating back the Atlantic-traveled
Surf, from the winter-flinging North, the maple
Leaf land—here at the prairie's edge, that
Mocker of ocean in the wide earth, where they raise
These buildings shaped with light to mark my living
Briefly in this place, by the Michigan curve
(*O Dearborn cabins, the heart-cringing cry, the hair
Ripped from the skull, the child branded on the wall—
Now the blue iris bloom in the spring from the rich earth*):

Here I remember the strange
Way I have had in this land, the incredible
Trail I have followed to this sun-bright morning
By the lake bend. I remember the continent
Wheeling to the sun when by day its sounds were calm

Sounds—the wild elk calling in the windy hills,
Song of the spirit-painted arrow, the partridge
Drum on the hollow log, the reverent prayer
Of the lonely Huron paddler to the water;
By night the silence of a land asleep, only
The unimaginable cry of earth
Working its ancient states of being, the crash
Of rain-corroded stone, the delicate shudder
Of leaves, the crumble of root-split sand, the river's
Multitude of muted voices murmuring.

I remember men, callers

To gods in the gusty rain, to the thunder birds,
Chippers of flint, scratchers of soil thinly
(*Now has the earth been torn with the anvil-hammered
Plough deeply for our hunger, and the black shaft sunk*).
The trail through the hills was moccasin wide and a stone
Twisted it, the rivers were swum. (*What of this
Concrete trampling the wild arum, the arched bridge?*)
The continent lived in its own and eternal way
Dreamless of change.

I remember the sea-defying

Ships that came from the East with the life-fulfilling
Sun, the scooped earth and the blood-crying sword lifted
To heaven, the god pledged, and after, the heel
Print in the sand was a brief thing.

I remember the first-coming men

With the English voices crying the harsh praise
Of a stern and awful god; the rotten fish
In the corn hill, the half-chinked cabin, the secret dead
In the first winter, the women wailing the abandoned
Home over the cold ocean, the little children
Who could not lie in the family burial lot
With their grandfathers, but had to bear a grave

In a new and lonely earth. (*It was a strange thing
 When the first white men took their Christian hearts
 Under the pagan land—Did the haunting spirits
 Of red-braves who had peopled their hills with gods
 Shaped in their own image, who could not see
 The hallowed bones of their ancestral dead
 Crushed by the plough, rise up and drive the pale
 Ghosts howling back across the sea to wander
 The mountainous winds of the world, with neither
 The old home nor the new to shelter them?*) And always
 The great hand of memory gripping the heart. In the
 North
 The fur-searching French, the Jesuit priest
 With no warmth from the skin-splitting cold but the hard
 flame
 Of a close and living God:

(*"My Reverend Father,
 The peace of Christ be with you. From Tadoussac
 In this barbarous land I write you. Our life
 Is a long and slow martyrdom, moose hair
 Defiles our food, we wipe our hands on the hairy dogs.
 I have baptized one, a scrofulous son of despising parents,
 Dying within the hour. I tell you we carry
 Many crosses, our hands bleed, but we do not all die,
 Thanks be to God."*)

I remember Atlantic towns and striding
 War, the dwindling army, and the English soul
 Plunged seven years in flame and steel and become
 The American soul—O strange, strong thing! And over
 The land ranged the unique American dream
 Of the common man and his right before all men
 To shape his own peculiar single self
 Tempered in the wild flame of beating out

On the huge anvil of the wilderness
A young and iron nation.

Land hunger drove them
West with the arc of the sun on the scant, blazed road
And the Boone way; the Wilderness Road through the Gap
To the Bloody Ground, and the salt licks, forever
Thrusting beyond the Appalachian valleys
The frail and fumbling fingers that would grow
To the brawny-fisted arms of empire. On
Into the prairie where the winds were lost
In the great stretches of the grass, and a man
Might dig into the hard mysterious deeps
Of his own soul and never reach the end
Till the pick shattered on the bedded rock
And the tired hands dropped.

Bracing themselves against
The Mississippi banks, they lunged unendingly
Up the Missouri and the Platte till the faint
Indian paths and the day-wide buffalo runs
Were crisscrossed and tramped out by wagon roads:
Oregon trail and the lonely mountain dying,
Santa Fé and the bones of the Spanish dream
That once had run across the land with laughter
And a sun-dark Southern body (*Coronado, sleep*),
The California and the waterless
Death of the desert mother where the sand
Sifted into the heart and the child cried
With swollen tongue, and the delirium
Came early with the morning sun—but beyond was gold
And the red flesh fought and rotted for that yellow
Softness beyond the stinking Humboldt Sink.

These were not heroes with the gods behind them
But humble people, clerks and farmers, merchants,

Soldiers and traders, foreign-speaking men,
Cobblers and carpenters, preachers, even, and tailors,
Many with wives and children, who, had they known
The actual danger, would have been content
To let the wild dream go, and let the West
Be their own familiar fields where sunset
Lingered an hour in twilight before it ran
The Juniata with bare feet and jumped the peaks.
These were simple folk, but chosen to prove again
That when a man and his destiny have met
In the high narrow place where there is room
For only one, man with a shout will rise
And laugh into the eager face of death
To loom an hour against the fires of fate
Somehow divine, but always with his feet
Touching the proud and certain earth.

These were

Family affairs, with the kids, the treasured
Rose cuttings from back East, the horses named, the dog
Wise in the family ways, the longing for home
Where the soil was deep (*O bare New Hampshire fields*) and
wind
Came a vast way to the little garden

(*Virgin body*)

*Of rich American earth, the silver stroking
Of the smooth hands of ploughs mated you to those
Men, and the lusty seeds of the new corn struck
Their roots in Missouri River silt where the naked
Dakota squaws danced fertility in you
From the moonlight—are you not weary with long bearing
To so many strangely speaking sires?*)

I remember

The bayberry candles, frail flicker in the wolf-howling
Night, the hearth swept with the turkey wing;

The council lodges shoved to the stony West
Where the Indian mind was split with the arrow-sharp
Hate, the too-tight-drawn bow snapped, the tribes
Gathered to the last riding, and Reno came.
The Yellowstone, the Platte, the Niobrara
(*Lovely, Greek-sounding name*), the mountain-coiling
Snake, were silvered with the horse-dashed spray. They
met

There in the great eye-wearying West: Gall
Whose heart was bitter as his name, Chief Joseph,
Roman Nose, Sitting Bull, Black Kettle,
Proud chiefs, good horsemen, with the iron body and the
iron

Will, pious before their own gods in their own way, hard
Fighters with the desperate home-defending courage.
The arrows sang their bitter songs, the feathers
Crimsoned in the stuck breast, the rifles
Shouted with brazen steel voices over the blood-thick
Whoop from the pierced throat, and the Indian women
Knew that the white faces were the Indian doom.
These proudest and most life-passionate men
Of all the American passage through the wide lands
Grubbed out their lives at the potato patch, although
The wind yet had certain words for them, and the chant
Was sung again in the mountain night. When their bones
Were buried with strange white prayers in the new
Government cemeteries on the sandy hills
Of the barren reservation fields where none
Of their kind had slept before (*Being brave men*
They were content to die, but sad not to rest
In the friendly graves of the tribal burying ground
Where the spirits of the place were known, and a man's
Horse was slain above him and his bow

Placed unstrung in his hand), a vital portion
Of the American soul forever passed away.

The cities came and the sun-following men
Struck the Pacific and the force of their traveling
Flung them back over the way they had come.
The North and the South brothers fought to declare
Whether there should be one power in the land or many;
The North won, bitterly, in the mightiest war
The world had seen, and the hurt and suffering parts
Were joined again to a whole, the outflung hands
Knew again the body that held them. And after
The shambling states with the red bandana tied
Loose at the throat and the panis pushed into the boot top
Became a nation and the world knew it.

And all

The pulses of the earth were stirred by the pounding
Heart of America and poured their blood
Over the great sea arteries, finding
Sometimes a country like their own, the Finns
By the Minnesota lakes, the Germans over
The prairie farms of Iowa, the English
In the Berkshire hills and valleys. The Southern folk
Left the gay dances, the vineyards mellowed with sunlight
On the terraced hills, and as Wop and Dago joined
Polack and Bohunk in the towns of steel
Where the great fires burned their guts out—Bethlehem
(*O mockery of the little Christ-found village*), Gary,
Youngstown, the hard, trip-hammer-beaten names.
The ancient features of the type were changed
Under a different sun, in a clearer air
That entered the lungs like wine, the swarthy face
Paled, cheek bones lifted and narrowed, hair

Straightened and faded, and the body moved
With a lighter step, the toes springy, the eyes
Eager as a bird's, and every man
Had a coiled spring in his nerves that drove him
In a restless fury of life.

The bloods mingled

Madly, the red flame of the sons of men
Who had rowed Ulysses on the wine-dark sea
Burned in the pale blue eyes of the North, eyes hardened
With centuries of staring from Viking masts
Into the unknown oceans—Leif the Lucky
Once beached their dragon-headed prow on the bare
Coast of this land, the first white man. (*Who knows
What strange, multi-fathered child will come
Out of the nervous travail of these bloods
To fashion in a new world continent
A newer breed of men?*)

Money and noise

Came with the clang of steel day long, night long, the
nervous
Body that could not sleep, but moaned and mumbled
From dawn to dawn, and would not quiet but screamed
Through the salary-earning day, through the night
Of the dinner-pail pause, shouting to make the useful
Thing, the device of comfort, and always, always
Make more, make more!—O cruel mechanic soul.
(*Great drummer, you have beat so long that barren
Chant it has become your blood and heart
With a wild hypnosis that will never stop
Till the mad drum break and the dulled brain hear again
The simple sounds of earth*)

A new war ranged the world,
And the fatal Horsemen rode, their bloody hoofs

Beating even these Europe-fronting beaches,
And this destiny moved outward to the farthest
Of the man-living lands. But the American
Soul, that should have soared, flapped in the driving wind
That blew with the stench of sweat and oil and the fetid
Fat breath that cried for gold. The rational
Imagination brooding on the stuff of earth,
Lucid science like a living spirit
Shaping the crude ways of light, was held only
As the convenient author of our ease.
Eyes that watched their ships circle the ultimate
Oceans of earth could not see beyond
The diamonds flashing their hands. (*You gave us shoes
For our feet, shirts for our backs, will you not give us
Power and peace for our hearts?*)

The ships bring few now.

It is strange to be a land of no more coming, of no
Men turned to the sun-refuge West In the New England
Villages the dead are a more populous city
Than the living—death has entered into the being
Of these states and will be with them forever
Making them dreamful of time.

Where shall they go

Now, the forever westward-wandering people?
They cannot be quiet, they cannot rest, they would not
Be American if they could do that. I tell them: You
Shall sit again the curved felloe, and with the bucket
Swinging under the wagon, the slouch-gaited hound
Following its restless shade patch, plunge
Into that vaster and more savage West,
The unfamiliar country of your heart.
With a new axe you shall build the clay-chinked cabin
On heights where the Sierras are as hills

And the heaven-harrying eagle hurls the wind,
Or in fire-running prairies where the autumn ducks
Shatter cold moonlight on a thousand lakes.
And wear the coonskin cap, jauntily if you will!
But when your fields bear greatly, the nearest neighbor
A hundred miles away confines you, your fences
Cut the horizon, the new house almost roofed,
Look one long evening down the cattle-trampled
Lane to the road where the last East-fleeing wagon's
Dust hangs in the air, and all the golden light
Of the westward-falling sun is a madman's song
As man-compelling as death—pack that night.
Let morning show the new shingles on the roof
Behind you, the hand-worn, finger-softened reins
Loose at the bit.

Wander that land until your life has shaped
Over the last grave in the unmarked grass
A soul as splendid as your long going-up-and-down
In that land (*O England-forgetting, self-creating heart!*) so
you

May shout out of dawn above the last night's fire
Before you swing again with the arc of the sun, a song
That will defy the little interval of man
In this American earth, so his memory in the world
Will last as long as light roams through the hollow
Ways of heaven. And at the weary evening camp, O thrust
Your hands to the waning sun, they will not crisp
But rather will hold the sun between their palms
Till they become eternal as its flame
And a perpetual light unto the face.

Then will be time for you to forge your own
Singular vision of eternity.

You, with behind you the American faith,
Shall find out, more profoundly now than ever
The thoughtful nations of the world have known,
The deep spirituality of man.

O remember
That in the general doom of nations, there
Is but one certain immortality
*(After the wind has ripped the last bright flag
To bird-mocked tatters of despair, after
The muffled horns of fate have mumbled out
The last low taps, after an alien hand
Has ploughed the barley fields, an alien tongue
Cried in the streets),* and that is not the thrust
Of courage against the world, nor the beating down
Of all the barriers of a continent
However bravely—but the searching out
Of the new way that a new country makes,
From all the blind impulses of its life,
A vision of the universal heart
That recreates the living form of man
In the unique and individual way
That is the shape and spirit of that land
O let your eyes be subtle as a bird's
To glean in the harvest fields of history
The spilled-out grain of truth.

And while you front
Your fate **between the** ocean and the ocean
Let the American quality, the dream
Of a land where men shall work their destiny
Deeply as they will, give you the power
To realize with proud and reverent heart
The strange identity of man as man
And fling it up against the dark of time

Where it may loom forever as the bright
Image of godhead in the simple man
That now has risen from this American earth
And shall but with the bitter end of things
Go back again into the humble earth.

Here at the Windy City

Where the long trains whistle by the sun-loud lake
I shall remember these men in my land.

